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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine if verbs were learned as easily as other words by primary school children. One hundred eight kindergarten children were divided into high, medium, and low I.Q. ranges and each range group was further divided--one group for each of three testing methods at each intelligence level. A list of words including 25 random verbs was presented in three instructional methods. The phonic method consisted of individual letter-sound presentations. In the kinesthetic method, the teacher and child together traced each word using the index finger, with the child saying the word while tracing it. In the meaningful context method, a sentence or phrase containing the word was printed on the back of a card. The word was spoken by the teacher, then the sentence was read, with particular emphasis on the specific word. Each child was asked to identify the words presented at the end of instruction on the first and second day. On the third day, each child was asked to identify the words for a delayed recall score. The results of the study, unlike earlier studies, indicated that verbs were not more difficult to learn than other words. No one instructional method proved more effective than another in learning, regardless of the intelligence levels of the children. (HTH)

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# COMPARATIVE DIFFICULTY OF VERBS AND OTHER WORDS IN A BEGINNING READING VOCABULARY

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COMPARATIVE DIFFICULTY OF VERBS AND OTHER WORDS
IN A BEGINNING READING VOCABULARY

> "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean--neither more nor less."
>
> "The question is," said Alice, "Whether you can make words mean so many different things."
>
> "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master--that's all."
>
> Alice was too much puzzled to say anything, so, after a minute, Humpty Dumpty began again. "They've a temper, some of them--particularly verbs, they're the proudest: adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs." (pp 229-230)
>
> Through the Looking Glass
> by Lewis Carroll

The purpose of this paper is to discuss studies which relate specifically to the "proudest" of words: verbs. Indeed I would like to focus primarily on one study, the Crouse study, which specifically investigated the difficulty of learning verbs in a beginning reading vocabulary.

Prior to the Crouse study, there were few attempts to investigate the relative difficulty of learning words of different parts of speech; indeed, there really appeared to be little emphasis placed on this aspect of developing a word list. Several studies warrant mention however.

Two early studies give some insight about the relative difficulty of learning words of different parts of speech. Wiley, as ealy as 1928, found

that nouns and adjectives were more rapidly learned than were other parts of speech. In 1933, Dorr, who tested 756 first graders on a 364 word list found that nouns were more easily recognized than any other parts of speech followed by adjectives, pronouns, adverbs and finally verbs.

Then in 1941, Losinski and Nemec, using the Dolch List, investigated the difficulty which second and third grade children had in recognizing words from that list. They tested 5,971 children from 1,252 schools. They found that 80 percent of the second graders had mastered 155 of the 220 words and that 80 percent of the third graders had mastered 207 of the 220 words. They also found that verbs, adjectives, and adverbs were the most difficult to learn.

Again in 1941, Selke, using words selected from 15 primers, conducted a study with 1,700 second grade children to determine relative difficulty. He found that verbs and least used function words were most difficult and that nouns were least difficult to learn.

In these early studies, verbs were identified as the most difficult part of speech to learn. However, because there is little information in these studies as to method, time for instruction, and selection of population, little can be generalized about the difficulty of learning verbs compared to other parts of speech. In the Crouse study, however, specific information about these factors is described.

Purpose

The purpose of the Crouse study was to determine if verbs chosen from words occurring most frequently in the Comprehensive Reading Vocabulary-Primary Level list (CRV-PL) were learned as easily as other words. Crouse

also attempted to compare the effectiveness of three teaching methods--kinesthetic, context, and phonic, and to ascertain the learning difficulty indexes for the 63 words taught in the study. Because 13 of the 63 words had also been taught in several other studies (Mangieri, 1972; Horodezky, 1973; Cogar, 1974), Crouse also attempted to determine if the difficulty indexes were the same for a different group of children.

Population

The 108 children used in this study were drawn from a population of 225 non-reading kindergarten children from five schools in rural West Virginia. The racial composition was 14 percent black and 86 percent white. In order to obtain a stratified random sampling, the Slosson Intelligence Test (1963) was administered, subjects were assigned in equal numbers to high, medium, and low intelligence categories, and then further divided into nine stratified randomly selected groups--one group for each of three methods at each of three intelligence levels. Therefore each of the nine groups was composed of 12 children, 4 from the high, medium and low I.Q. ranges.

Vocabulary Selection

For the Crouse study, 50 words, 25 verbs and 25 words which were other parts of speech, such as nouns, adverbs, prepositions and adjectives, were selected from the CRV-PL. It is interesting to note that 44.4 percent of the words on the total CRV-PL are verbs. Also, 13 words which previously had been taught in the Mangieri, Horodezky and Cogar studies were added to the basic 50, making a total of 63 words. These 63 words were assigned through random sampling to three word lists, 21 words in a list. Each list was then further divided into three groups of 7 words each.

Of the 25 verbs randomly selected for use on this study, 3 were heteronyms (live, read, does) and 6 of the words could have multiple meanings. In the Crouse study, of course, the pronunciation and meaning selected were those appropriate for verbs.

Treatment

Three instructional methods--the phonic, kinesthetic, and meaningful context--were used to teach the words to the nine groups of children assigned to Sections I, II, and II. Each word was printed in manuscript letters on a six by nine inch card for presentation to children. The phonic blending method consisted of individual letter-sound presentations. The teacher would say, "This is the letter ____. It makes the sound:...." This procedure was continued for each letter in the word.

In the kinesthetic method, the teacher and the child together traced the word using the index finger, and the child said the word as it was traced. After several trials, the child did the tracing unassisted, again saying the word as he/she traced it.

In the meaningful context method, a sentence or phrase containing the word was printed on the back of the card. The word in isolation was presented orally by the teacher; then the sentence or phrase was read by the teacher with specific emphasis placed on the specific word to be learned.

Each of the sections was taught 7 words a week for 3 weeks (a total of 21 words). Each group was divided into two groups of 6 for ease of instruction. The instructional periods were approximately 15 minutes long.

The designated method was used and at the end of the instruction, each child individually was asked to identify the word presented to him. The same teaching and testing procedure, using the same words, was implemented on the second day. On the third day, each subject was asked to identify the words for a delayed recall score. No instruction occurred on that day. Therefore, three scores were obtained: immediate recall I, immediate recall II, and delayed recall.

Scoring and Analysis

A rank order of difficulty for the 63 words in the study was determined by computing percentages based on the number of correct responses to words when taught through the 3 methods. A comprehensive word difficulty index was established through percentages based upon the total number of correct responses to all the words. A four-factor repeated measure analysis of variance was used to determine the effectiveness of the 3 methods in learning verbs and other words in the several lists for different I.Q. levels. A Spearman rank-correlation coefficient was used to determine the relationships among the difficulty rank orders for the individual methods, the comprehensive difficulty rank orders, and the frequency of occurrence rank orders. Finally, a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was used to determine the relationship for the difficulty indexes for the 13 words common to several studies.

Findings

1. No significant differences were found among the learning difficulties of verbs when taught by the three different instructional methods--phonic, kinesthetic, and meaningful context.

Findings cont'd

2. No significant differences were found between the mean difficulty of verbs and the mean difficulty of other parts of speech when the instructional methods were combined. In other words, verbs were learned as easily as the other words in the study.
3. Although low I.Q. subjects learned fewer total words than medium or high I.Q. subjects, there was no significant difference among the groups between verb learning and learning of other parts of speech.
4. There was significant interaction between methods and lists. For example, the mean for verbs was higher in Word List B when taught through the kinesthetic method and lower in Word List A when taught through the meaningful context method. Several other differences occurred but were contributed to instructional experiences in the Kindergarten Reading Program. In other words, specific words were learned better through one method than another.
5. A comprehensive rank order (from least to most difficult) was found for three different sets of words: (a) the basic 50 words; (b) the 63 words (50 + 13); and (c) the thirteen words common to the Mangieri, Horodezky, Cogar, and Crouse studies. The ten easiest words to learn (for the 63 words presented) were: do, four, she, sit, Mom, fly, see, try, three, and penny. Five of these ten are verbs.
6. A non-significant relationship was found between rank order of learning difficulty when taught by the three methods, and the rank order of frequency of occurrence of words, indicating that the ease of learning a word is not related to its frequency of occurrence in the CRV-PL List.

7. The significantcorrelations found between the difficulty indices for the various methods and the comprehensive difficulty index rank order indicate that the learning difficulty of these words was not affected by any one of the three instructional methods.
8. The correlations between the difficulty indices for the 13 words common to the Horodezky study and the present study and the Cogar study and the present study were not significant. Although there was a significant correlation between the difficulty indices of the Mangieri study and this study, it was determined through additional analysis that this significance could have occurred by chance.

The results of this study, unlike others conducted earlier, suggest that verbs are not more difficult to learn than other words. Also no one instructional method proved more effective than another in learning words regardless of the intelligence level of the children.

In conclusion, the results suggest the following implications for classroom instruction. First, because no one method proved more effective than another, teachers are encouraged to use an eclectic approach in teaching new vocabulary words. Secondly, writers of textbooks and materials for children should take into consideration not only the frequency with which a word occurs on a given word list, but the ease with which it can be learned, or its learnability.

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